You

THE EARLY CREEDS OF THE NEW TESTAMENT

Gemini 3.1 Pro Extended

In New Testament scholarship, there is a broad, cross-denominational consensus that the New Testament contains fragments of earlier, pre-existing oral traditions, hymns, and creeds. These fragments are widely considered by historians and biblical scholars to be the earliest statements of Christian belief, predating the writing of the Gospels and even the letters of Paul.

Scholars across the theological spectrum—from conservative historians like N.T. Wright to critical scholars like Bart Ehrman and Rudolf Bultmann—agree that these rudimentary creeds originated within the very first few years (or even months) after the crucifixion of Jesus, likely between 30 and 35 CE.

Much of the modern framework for understanding these texts comes from the foundational work of Oscar Cullmann in his 1949 book, *The Earliest Christian Confessions*. Cullmann established that these early creeds were strictly Christological (focusing exclusively on Jesus rather than a Trinitarian formula) and were generated to meet highly practical, everyday situations in the early church.

How Scholars Identify Early Creeds

Because the New Testament authors embedded these creeds into their own letters, scholars use a method called **Form Criticism** to extract them. They look for several telltale signs:

- **Rabbinic Terminology:** Authors often introduce them with explicit language denoting the passing down of oral tradition (e.g., "For what I received I passed on to you").
- **Unusual Vocabulary:** The Greek text often contains words or phrases that the author rarely or never uses anywhere else in their writings.
- **Poetic Structure:** They are often rhythmic, highly stylized, or feature parallel stanzas that made them easy to memorize in an oral culture.
- **Aramaic Substratum:** Some Greek phrases in these creeds are clunky translations of what were originally Aramaic phrases, tracing them back to the earliest Jewish-Christian communities in Jerusalem or Antioch.

The Most Prominent Early Creeds

1. The Core Confession (Romans 10:9 / 1 Corinthians 12:3)

> *"Jesus is Lord" (Kyrios Iesous)*

This is widely considered the absolute bedrock from which all subsequent creeds evolved. In the Greco-Roman world, "Caesar is Lord" was a standard political and religious declaration. Acknowledging Jesus as *Kyrios* was both a subversive political statement (useful in times of persecution) and a foundational baptismal confession. It served to identify Jesus with the divine authority of the God of the Old Testament.

2. The Resurrection Creed (1 Corinthians 15:3–7)

> *"That Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day according to the Scriptures, and that he appeared to Cephas, and then to the Twelve..."*

Universally regarded as the preeminent "preaching" creed in the New Testament, Paul explicitly states he is passing on a tradition he received. Scholars generally agree that Paul received this creed shortly after his conversion, most likely when he visited Jerusalem to meet with Peter (Cephas) and James around 36 CE. This places the formation of the creed to within 1 to 5 years of the crucifixion, establishing that the atoning death and bodily resurrection of Jesus were the very earliest teachings of the movement.

3. The Christ Hymn (Philippians 2:6–11)

> *"Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant..."*

Often referred to as the *Carmen Christi*, this poetic passage describes Jesus's descent from heaven to earth and his subsequent exaltation. The heavy rhythmic structure and distinct vocabulary lead most scholars to conclude this was an early Christian hymn sung in the churches before Paul wrote to the Philippians. Critical scholars point to this passage as evidence that an incredibly "high Christology" (viewing Jesus as pre-existent and divine) developed incredibly early, rather than evolving slowly over centuries.

4. The Royal Seed / Son of God Formula (Romans 1:3–4)

> *"...regarding his Son, who as to his earthly life was a descendant of David, and who through the Spirit of holiness was appointed the Son of God in power by his resurrection from the dead..."*

Placed at the very beginning of his letter to the Romans, Paul uses a polished formula to introduce his gospel to a church he had not yet visited. The structure features a sharp, two-part parallelism contrasting Jesus's earthly, Davidic lineage with his heavenly exaltation. Because it uses non-Pauline phrasing (such as "Spirit of holiness"), scholars agree Paul is quoting a pre-existing formula to build immediate theological rapport.

5. The Mystery of Godliness (1 Timothy 3:16)

> *"He appeared in the flesh, was vindicated by the Spirit, was seen by angels, was preached among the nations, was believed on in the world, was taken up in glory."*

This six-line poetic stanza is recognized as a highly developed, early Christological creed. Along with passages like **1 Peter 3:18–22** (which weaves together Jesus's death, descent to the dead, and resurrection), it demonstrates how early Christians quickly formalized their theology into memorable, rhythmic blocks to be used in worship and baptism.

The Historical Significance

The widespread consensus regarding these creeds significantly impacts historical Jesus studies. Rather than viewing the New Testament purely as the theological invention of later decades, modern scholarship treats these embedded creeds as distinct historical artifacts. They demonstrate that the central theological tenets of Christianity were already crystallized in formulaic, memorable statements prior to any actual New Testament document being written.